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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 000450

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SUBJECT: DINNER WITH COMMENTATORS, ACTIVISTS MIRRORS
CONFUSION, ANXIETY IN THE STREETS

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Classified By: Ambassador Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a raucous dinner meeting April 18 with SCA DAS Evan Feigenbaum, emotions were high as local commentators and activists expressed varying viewpoints on the current political situation in Kyrgyzstan. While some advocated immediate regime change, others strongly believed reforming institutional authorities, within the current system, would be more beneficial for long-term stability. None were able to predict what the future held for Kyrgyzstan. However, all were confident that the country was at a pivotal moment in its development. Perhaps most interesting to note was the dramatic shift in positions by those who had previously supported systematic reforms, and the manner in which once like-minded interlocutors have splintered off from one another -- perhaps as a result of the government's initiative to split the opposition into as many parts as possible. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) SCA DAS Evan Feigenbaum was joined by AUCA Vice President Bakyt Beshimov, NGO Interbilim Asiya Sasykbayeva, Adilet Legal Clinic's Cholpon Jakupova, Akipress Director Murat Tazabekov, former Central Bank Head Ulan Sarbanov, and NGO leader Edil Baisalov for what turned out to be a spirited dinner meeting on April 18. During the four hour discussion, emotions remained high as each guest expounded sometimes widely varying prognoses of the current political situation in Kyrgyzstan, often arguing intensely amongst each other about what the next steps should be for the opposition and government. While some, including Tazabekov and Surbanov, advocated a moderate approach, to enable civil society to reform and empower state institutions over time and within the current system of governance, others opted for more radical methods.

CHANGE NEEDED (BUT HOW?

13. (C) Both Jakupova and Sasykbayeva -- who had just returned from Alatau Square, where they joined protestors calling for President Bakiyev's immediate resignation -- believed that the country could not survive under Bakiyev and, although not fully confident of Kulov's capabilities, said that Bakiyev should step down. While disdain for Bakiyev was shared by all, some believed that it would not be beneficial for Kyrgyzstan's stability if the president was forced out of office. Citing existing tensions between north and south, Beshimov and others were confident that civil unrest would escalate if the opposition did not find a way to effect change gradually, systematically. Sarbanov commented that neither side seemed to take into account the influence of religious figures and the geopolitical ramifications of their respective actions. Additionally, Sarbanov noted the importance of reforming institutions first, so that when new leaders were brought into office, their powers would be defined clearly.

14. (C) Baisalov was quick to denounce the United Front-led protests, noting that the November 2006 demonstrations were based on morality and ideals rather than a struggle for power. Repeating his "hatred" for Bakiyev, Baisalov confided that he would rather work with his sworn enemy than forcibly remove him from power and watch civil unrest unfold as a result. Instead, he insisted early parliamentary elections were key to moving the country in the right direction. He also claimed the opposition was encouraging regional conflict by northern opposition supporters blaming southerners -- like Bakiyev -- for "taking over the government." Baisalov emphatically expressed concern over such rhetoric, demanding that everyone at the table take advantage of their positions and influence to calm the situation.

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15. (C) Baisalov went on to call PM Atambayev a "foot in the door" for the opposition, and asked everyone to help the PM place more opposition supporters in the White House. Referring to the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, Baisalov said that it was not unusual for opposition members to join the government. Baisalov concluded by advocating the need to persuade Bakiyev and pro-presidential MPs to reform, rather than the use of force.

COMMENT: ARGUMENTS ABOUND, SOLUTIONS AMISS AMONGST A FRACTURED OPPOSITION

16. (C) The argument that ensued over dinner between previously likeminded political commentators made it apparent that civil society and the opposition have indeed been split successfully by pro-Bakiyev forces in the government. The heated debate over forcibly removing Bakiyev from office also revealed a shift in strategy by those, like Jakupova and Sasykbayeva, who are now insistent that President Bakiyev must go. While each guest was armed with criticisms about the demonstrations and the government's recent moves, there was a lack of consensus on how to resolve the current crisis effectively. Although an intellectual debate, the discussion may reflect the dilemma that the opposition, government, and society as a whole are currently facing in Kyrgyzstan.

17. (U) This cable has been cleared by DAS Evan Feigenbaum.

YOVANOVITCH